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AUTHOR Algozzine, Bob; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Forty special education teachers were asked to make decisions about a fourth grade boy who was portrayed as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed and who exhibited either high or low competence. Classroom placement decisions and future performance predictions were found to be a function of the child's perceived competence. Results were discussed with regard to implications in labeling and mainstreaming. (Author)

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University of Minnesota

Research Report No. 31

CLASSROOM DECISION MAKING AS A FUNCTION OF DIAGNOSTIC LABELS AND PERCEIVED COMPETENCE

Bob Algozzine, Jo Webber, Maggie Campbell, Suellen Moore, and Jim Gilliam

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IRLD

Director: James E. Ysseldyke

Associate Director: Phyllis K. Mirkin

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I. Adequacy of Norm-Referenced Data for Prediction of Success

II. Computer Simulation Research on the Assessment/Decision-making/Intervention Process

III. Comparative Research on Children Labeled LD and Children Failing Academically but not Labeled LD

IV. Surveys on In-the-Field Assessment, Decision Making, and Intervention

V. Ethological Research on Placement Team Decision Making

VI. Bias Following Assessment

VII. Reliability and Validity of Formative Evaluation Procedures

VIII. Data-Utilization Systems in Instructional Programming

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Bob Algozzine

University of Florida

Jo Webber, Maggie Campbell, Suellen Moore, and Jim Gilliam

University of Texas

Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities

University of Minnesota

June, 1980

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Abstract

Special education teachers were asked to make decisions about a fourth grade boy who was portrayed as learning disabled or emotionally handicapped and who exhibited one of two levels of competence (i.e., high or low). Classroom placement decisions and future performance predictions were found to be a function of the child's perceived competence. The results were discussed with regard to implications within labeling research and mainstreaming.

Classroom Decision Making as a Function of
Diagnostic Labels and Perceived Competence

Psychoeducational decision making is an omnipresent activity in America's schools. Results of assessments are used to make various types of educational decisions. Salvia and Ysseldyke (1978) indicated that screening, identification/classification/placement, program planning and evaluation decisions were routinely made for children in need of special or remedial education. Issues relative to each of these types of decisions have been identified and discussed (Ysseldyke, 1979; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1979).

A common form of decision making that often is overlooked in general discussions of assessment practices is that of exit criteria or within special class decision making. Special education teachers often have to make decisions about the placement of children who have been in their programs and who possibly are eligible to leave. The basis for such decisions has not been adequately investigated. Placement decision making is an important aspect of special education teaching; similarly, informal decision making about the future performances of children is also of interest. Expectations (e.g., predictions of future behavior) held by special education teachers may be influential in the lives of the children they teach.

In general, teachers and other professionals have been shown to hold different expectations for children as a function of a child's sex (Palardy, 1969), race (Rubovits & Maehr, 1973), socioeconomic status (Lenkowsky & Blackman, 1968), physical appearance (Berscheid & Walster,

1974), body image (Staffieri, 1967), perceived intelligence (Matusek & Oakland, 1979), and behavior (LaVoie & Adams, 1974). To a lesser extent, these same characteristics have been shown to influence psychoeducational decision making. For example, Ross and Salvia (1975) found that classification decisions in the area of mental retardation were influenced by the physical appearance of the child; Giesbrecht and Routh (1979) found that "children with negative teacher comments [suggesting behavior problems] were judged more likely to need special educational help... than children without such comments" (p. 184); and, Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1980) reported that a referred child was more likely to be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed when the referral problem was listed as behavioral rather than academic in nature.

The extent to which decisions made by special education teachers about children already in special education has not been investigated. The purpose of this experiment was to ascertain the extent to which special education teachers' decisions about a child would vary based on the type of decision being made, the label assigned to the child, and the child's perceived academic competence in two areas. It was hypothesized that no differences would be observed.

Method

Subjects

Forty teachers participating in an in-service workshop in North Carolina served as subjects in this study. The average age of the participants was 30 years (SD = 7.5) and the average number of years of teaching experience was 6 (SD = 5). Each teacher was certified to teach special education classes and most were certified in the area of

emotional handicaps. Approximately 90% of the sample was female and all of the teachers had volunteered to attend the workshop.

Procedure

The participants were enrolled in an in-service workshop and, as part of the initial orientation, were asked to complete several tasks. Initially, the subjects supplied some demographic information. They then viewed a short videotape and reviewed a brief case study prior to being asked to make some classroom placement-type decisions. The entire experiment took approximately one-half hour and all subjects were informed of the intended purpose of the project immediately following their participation.

Videotape. A 12-minute color videotape, designed for use in labeling research (Foster, Ysseldyke, & Reese, 1975), was shown to the participants. It portrayed a beginning fourth grade boy engaging in a variety of activities; he performs some achievement test items, some perceptual-motor tasks, and "free-plays" for a short period of time. All test performances were staged to be "at grade level." The teachers were told that the tape was made during an earlier interview; in fact, it was presented in an attempt to create a more realistic situation than might result from the bogus case study only.

Case study. A one-page "case report summary" was prepared; it included information indicating average intellectual ability and minor behavior problems (e.g., distractibility, poor work habits, etc.). Information from the child's teachers and parents was also available for review. The purpose for presenting the brief case study was to offer "average" intellectual performance data consistent with the video-

tape and to provide a vehicle for use in the experimental manipulation.

Independent variable. In half of the case studies, the child was said to be from a learning disabilities (LD) classroom and in half from an emotionally handicapped (EH) classroom. Additionally, the teacher comments indicated either LD or EH placements. Attached to each case study were two worksheets with either "E. H. Summer School" or "L. D. Summer School" written across them; one contained 20 math problems and the other 10 "spelling words." The performance for the worksheets was clearly represented as either 90% or greater correct on each sheet or 50-60% correct. The work samples were manipulated to reflect an individual with a relatively high degree of competence for the items sampled or one with a relatively low degree of competence; in fact, a normal third grade child was asked to fill in the answers according to the predetermined standards of performance.

Dependent variables. After viewing the videotape and reviewing the case study, the subjects were asked to indicate the appropriateness of several classroom placement alternatives (e.g., LD resource room, EH resource room, or regular class room). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale in which 1 = not very appropriate and 5 = very appropriate. Additionally, the participants were asked to indicate the scores (i.e., 0-20%, 21-40%, 41-60%, 61-80%, 81-100%) they thought the child would receive if given similar math or spelling work in the future.

Design and data analysis. Data obtained from the placement questions were analyzed in a three-factor mixed analysis of variance design. The label assigned to the child (i.e., LD or EH) and his portrayed competence (i.e., low or high) represented two between subjects factors

and the type of classroom placement decision (i.e., EH or LD resource room or regular class) was the within subjects factor. Responses to the two future performance questions were each analyzed through a two-factor (i.e., label by competence) analysis of variance procedure. The level of confidence was set at the 5% level and an additional criterion of at least a 0.5 unit difference between means was imposed. This latter decision rule was based on the selected value representing approximately a 10% difference within the scale; it was used in an attempt to separate significant, important differences from trivial ones.

Under these conditions, then, subjects were randomly assigned to review the case study and performance data of one of four types of children. It was assumed that each participant thought the child they were being questioned about was an EH boy whose academic performance was high or low or an LD boy whose academic performance was high or low. The effects of manipulating these labels and degrees of competence on teacher classroom placement decisions and future performance predictions were of interest.

Results

Placement Decisions

Means, standard deviations, and analysis of variance summary table for subjects' responses to the extent to which selected types of placements were appropriate for the case study child are presented in Tables 1 and 2. A significant main effect for placement and a placement by competence interaction was indicated.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Since the main effect was involved in the interaction, only a simple effects follow-up was completed. An analysis of those means indicated that placement in an EH resource room was regarded as most appropriate ($\bar{X}$ = 3.45) regardless of the child's competence and, taken together, the LD placement for the low competent child and the regular class placement for the high competent child were seen as more appropriate ($\bar{X}$ = 2.80) than the LD room for the high competent child and/or the regular class for the low competent child, which were rated similarly as least appropriate ($\bar{X}$ = 1.95). However, the appropriateness of the LD or regular class placements varied as function of the child's competence. The LD placement was seen as less appropriate for the high competent child ($\bar{X}$ = 2.1) than for the low competent one ($\bar{X}$ = 2.8) and the regular class was seen as less appropriate for the low competent child ($\bar{X}$ = 1.8) than for the high competent one ($\bar{X}$ = 2.8). A graphic representation of these results is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Future Predictions

Analysis of subjects' responses to the future performance prediction questions yielded two significant main effects for competence (Math: F = 166.63, df = 1,36, $p < .05$; Spelling: F = 153.60, df, 1,36, $p < .05$). The teachers' predictions for future performances of a competent or less competent child were different; they felt that subsequent performance would be similar to past performance. The average performance predicted in math ($\bar{X}$ = 4.95) and spelling ($\bar{X}$ = 4.90) for the competent child was different than that for the less competent child ($\bar{X}$ =

3.15 and 3.30, respectively). The distributions of the subjects' responses among various options available for predicted scores are presented in Table 3. While some subjects felt a competent child's performance would decrease, most (i.e., 95% and 90%) felt it would remain the same in each achievement area; comparable results were indicated for the less competent child.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

In this experiment, special class teachers were given an opportunity to make decisions about a boy presented to them in a hypothetical case study form; the extent to which those decisions varied as a function of the label assigned to the child and his perceived competence was investigated. The teachers indicated that different types of classroom placements were considered more or less appropriate relative to the child's competence. In this sample, special class teachers rated the E. H. resource room placement as most appropriate regardless of the competence portrayed in the child. Their choices as to the appropriateness of the L. D. resource room or the Regular classroom were dependent upon the child's competence. Additionally, their predictions of the child's future performance were a function of the initial performance samples that were reviewed. No differential effects were observed for either of the labels (i.e., LD or EH).

These results should not be interpreted as evidence that negative labeling effects do not exist; in fact, considerable research has shown

that special education labels produce differential expectations in teachers and other professionals (Algozzine & Mercer, in press). However, when competence and labels have been evaluated, the labels seem to loose their salience as expectancy-generating stimuli (Freeman & Algozzine, 1980; Gibbons & Gibbons, 1980; Gottlieb, 1974; Siperstein, Budoff, & Bak, 1980; Strichart & Gottlieb, 1975).

Special education teachers often are called upon to make psycho-educational decisions. The results of this research represent evidence suggesting that when classroom placement decisions and future performance predictions are made the competence of the child involved in the decision is important. Teachers and other school personnel seem to find competence to be a powerful, salient feature of a youngster on which to base decisions. This observation has important implications for alterations of the more common effects of labels that have been indicated when labels were studied in isolation. It may be possible to alleviate the negative effects of special education labels by assigning or pointing out the levels of competence of the child.

The extent to which regular classroom teachers would be similarly affected by labels and perceived competence remains conjecture. Should the effects be the same, then, a technique for facilitating mainstreaming of handicapped children may be apparent. Special education personnel faced with the possibility of placing a handicapped child into a regular classroom may be able to improve the child's chances for favorable acceptance by emphasizing those areas in which the child is competent and deemphasizing those areas likely to reduce the expectations of the receiving teacher.

That such research will be completed in the future is probable. That the effects of application of these and other findings will benefit handicapped youngsters is hopeful. The extent to which either of these future outcomes is realized is left to educational researchers interested in the effects of various child characteristics on classroom decision making.

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Footnote

Bob Algozzine is affiliated with the Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities at the University of Minnesota.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Special Education Teachers' Ratings of Appropriateness of Various Placements

Type of Child	Level of Competence	Type of Placement[a]		
		EH Resource Room	LD Resource Room	Regular Class Room
Emotionally Disturbed	High	$\bar{X}$ = 3.2 SD = 1.4	$\bar{X}$ = 2.2 SD = 1.3	$\bar{X}$ = 2.9 SD = 1.0
	Low	$\bar{X}$ = 2.9 SD = 1.3	$\bar{X}$ = 3.2 SD = 1.6	$\bar{X}$ = 1.8 SD = 1.1
Learning Disabled	High	$\bar{X}$ = 3.8 SD = 1.3	$\bar{X}$ = 2.0 SD = 1.2	$\bar{X}$ = 2.6 SD = 1.3
	Low	$\bar{X}$ = 3.8 SD = 1.1	$\bar{X}$ = 2.4 SD = 0.8	$\bar{X}$ = 1.8 SD = 1.0

[a]Teachers rated the appropriateness of the child on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not very appropriate and 5 = very appropriate.

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Summary Table for

Classroom Placement Decisions

Source	MS	df	F
Label (L)	0.03	1	0.06
Competence (C)	0.53	1	1.00
L X C	0.01	1	0.02
Error	0.53	36	
Placement (P)	15.36	2	7.64*
P X L	4.16	2	2.07
P X C	6.81	2	3.39*
P X L X C	0.68	2	0.34
Error	2.01	72	

*$p < .05$

Table 3

Numbers and Percentages of Teachers Indicating Various Levels of Predicted Performance for Competent and Less Competent Child

Predicted Performance Level	Type of Child	
	Competent	Less Competent
Math		
21-40%	0 (0%)	2 (10%)
41-60%	0 (0%)	13 (65%)
61-80%	1 (5%)	5 (25%)
81-100%	19 (95%)	0 (0%)
Spelling		
21-40%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
41-60%	0 (0%)	14 (70%)
61-80%	2 (10%)	6 (30%)
81-100%	18 (90%)	0 (0%)

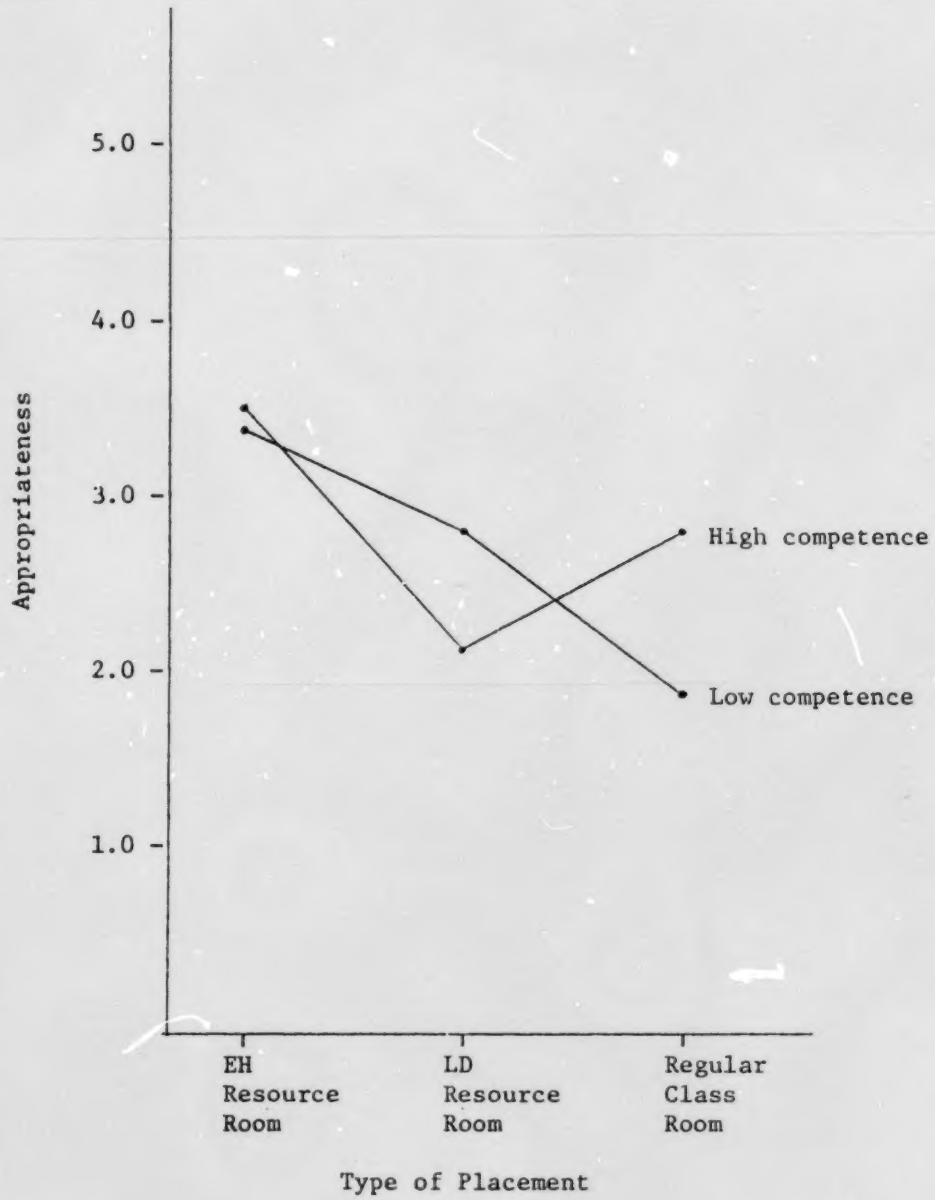

Figure 1. Graphic representation of competence by placement interaction.

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